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ABSTRACT

Compared to regular freshman composition textbooks, materials for advanced instruction in English as a foreign language are unsubstantial. An examination of EFL tests reveals the triviality of much of the content, particularly in comparison with the sophistication and significance of literature taught to native speakers. In addition, some EFL narratives reinforce racial stereotypes. History texts present many inaccurate or biased interpretations of events. There are several reasons for the inferiority of EFL texts: (1) sentimentalism interferes with the presentation of reality; (2) textbook writers confuse simple syntax with simple-minded content; and (3) there are too few advanced EFL texts compared to the number of freshman composition texts; consequently, EFL teachers have little from which to choose. We need more and better books that encourage foreign students' contact with the western humanist tradition of learning in the U.S. (LG)

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Paul Willcott

Advanced EFL and Traditional Goals of Freshman Composition

Compared to regular freshman composition advanced EFL has been trivial, immoral, inaccurate, and mistaken. This is true in regard to daily practices and to stated goals. And in those institutions where a semester or a year of foreign student's English has been allowed to substitute for the native speaker's composition class, the situation is extremely wasteful and dishonest. I base these statements primarily on an examination of textbooks, and I assume that what is in the textbooks is what is in the classroom.

Now I want to illustrate each of the adjectives above--trivial, immoral, inaccurate, mistaken. None of the illustrations are exclusive, i.e., none are immoral without being also more or less trivial, mistaken, inaccurate. In fact, since I am concentrating on the most terrible occurrences, most of the following quotations partake of all those negative qualities.

Triviality from Friend, Writing English as a Second Language, an example of the narrative paragraph.

> "A few years ago I joined several other boys and girls on a trip to some caves. It became dark, and we were frightened and hungry. We built a fire and toasted some hot dogs over the fire. They tasted very good with our hot coffee. After the meal we sat around the fire and toasted marshmallows and sang songs. Then we moved our gear into the cave. We unrolled our sleeping bags and crawled into them. We felt warm and safe there."

There is an irony in this. The Friend book is an effective one for teaching writing. I use it myself. But I am embarrassed at selections like the one I just read. Worse, I am under an emotional strain on account of it. I finished reading that passage one day just as the bell rang. I closed the book, walked to the next room and began reading another paragraph of narration to a class of native speakers.

> "As in Omaha, my mother was pregnant again, this time with my youngest sister. Shortly after Yvonne was born came the nightmare night in 1929, my earliest vivid memory. I remember being suddenly snatched awake into a frightening confusion of pistol shots and shouting and smoke and flames. My father had shouted and shot at the two white men who had set the fire and were running away. Our home was burning down around us. We were lunging and bumping and tumbling all over each other trying to escape. My mother, with the baby in her arms, just made it into the yard before the house crashed in, showering sparks. I remember we were outside in the night in our underwear, crying and yelling our heads off. The white police and firemen came and stood around watching as the house burned down to the ground."

This is from the Autobiography of Malcolm X.

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Immoral

The following is from the exemplary essay in Chapter 10 of Doty and Ross, Language and Life in the U.S.A. Vol. I.

OSCAR THE FISH

> Americans like to tell fish stories. Fishermen who like to brag about the big fish they have caught may have started the habit. Each one tells of a fish that was in some way larger or better or more difficult to catch than any other fish, or that was caught in some unusually clever way. If you tell a story that is just a little bit too good to be true, someone will say, "There's something fishy about that." Here is a fish story that is slightly different from the usual kind.
>
> Once out west in Colorado there lived an Indian who had a pet fish named Oscar. He kept it in a tub of water behind his tent. This Indian was so lazy that he got tired of putting fresh water into the tub every day. He decided it might be easier to teach Oscar to live without water, and he wondered if he could find a way to do this. He began by keeping the fish out of water for a few minutes each day. Gradually he increased the time so that finally Oscar could stay out of water all night if he lay in the wet grass by the tub. At last the day came when Oscar could stay out of water indefinitely and could go anywhere. He loved the Indian very much and would follow him around like a dog. Whenever the Indian went away from home, Oscar would go with him, flipping himself along on his tail. Some people thought that he was the oddest fish that they had ever seen, but the Indian considered him the most faithful friend that he had ever had.
>
> One day the Indian went to town, with Oscar following behind as usual. Suddenly, however, the Indian realized that Oscar wasn't there. He went back along the path looking everywhere for him. He thought he might have gotten lost at the crossroads. Then he found a place where they had crossed a small bridge over a stream. He stepped onto the bridge. In the floor there was a hole. The Indian peered through it. Sure enough, tragedy had occurred. Oscar had fallen through the hole. There he floated on his back in the water below the bridge. Poor Oscar! He had lived without water too long!

The stereotype of the Indian here can be used to teach about stereotypes, i.e. the teacher can overcome the shortcoming of the text if he wants. Additionally he can point out that the moral of the story of Oscar the Fish is one that many Americans have used to justify racial segregation. The people I grew up around would no doubt interpret Oscar as uppity or something of that sort. This of course can lead to enlightenment, if in a rather backhanded way.

To save time I will now dispense with counter-quotes from freshman composition texts. It is difficult to imagine a story such as Oscar the Fish being used in one. And there are many essays explaining and debunking stereotypes and racism in the texts we use for native speakers.

Inaccurate

From Vol. 2 of Doty and Ross, Language and Life in the U. S. A.

> "In spite of this tendency /ethnic pride/, however, America is not deeply divided socially according to national background or the length of time one's ancestors have lived in this country. This is particularly true after the first generation. Immigrants gradually become assimilated. Differences of national background have become more a matter of pride than of social distinction and do not hold groups apart from the community."

There are two things wrong with this. (1) Along with millions of Blacks and Mexican-Americans and others, I just don't believe it. (2) No mention is made in the text that there is any question about the accuracy of the statement.

Mistaken

I include this term in spite of its vagueness--mostly so I can use the following example. It is mistaken--in intent, in conception, in every way.

From Weeks, Reading American History Ch. 1. "The Spanish Discovery of the New World"

> "Men began to discuss the possibility of going to the East by sea rather than by land. The question was asked: 'Can we get to China and India sooner by sea?'"

That America had been 'discovered' 4000 years earlier gets overlooked. The reader is encouraged by the pronoun "we" to identify with the imperialist European force. Indeed Europe equals mankind in this statement. "Men began to discuss the possibility of going to the East by sea."

To continue:

> Columbus and his men set sail, as every American /Brazilian, Peruvian?/ schoolboy knows in 1492. He used an important invention for the crossing of the Atlantic Ocean: the astrolabe.

Where is the note of realism? Where is the fact that along with their advanced technology the Europeans brought venereal disease and genocide?

Further,

> . . . on October 12 . . . a small island in the Bahamas was sighted by a lookout on one of the ships. Columbus took natives aboard ship /Could that be expressed more impersonally?/ and called them 'Indians'. He thought they were inhabitants of India. He asked / ?/ them to guide him to other islands in the area.

One can imagine the request. Voice very loud, all function words omitted. "You. Indian. Take me other islands." "Yes. Keemosabee. You betcha."

No indication of what that event began is signalled in this next. This is the conquistador, Puritan, Kit Carson mentality teaching school in the 20th century.

More--

> The land that Columbus finally reached was neither China nor India, nor was it anywhere near those two countries. Instead he had come upon a new land of riches for Spain. So much gold was found in Indian temples of worship in the New World (sic) that poets began to speak of the new (sic) continent as the 'realms of gold.'

I work with Latinos who are as Indian as they are Spanish. I object to these attititudes in EFL texts as much as I object to them in our culture as a whole.

One more quotation from the Weeks text.

> The continual shortage of food due to increase in population caused the colonists to experiment with extreme measures. One of these was communal ownership and use of the soil. After a few years, however, this collectivist economy had reduced the colonists' [comrades] initiative seriously. It had proved to be unworkable and finally had to be abandoned. The land was distributed among the families for private ownership and use.

I have illustrated triviality, inaccuracy, immorality, and mistakenness in the essays of some EFL exts. I want now to argue that this kind of thing does not happen accidentally, it happens by design. Advanced EFL texts are trivial, inaccurate, immoral, and mistaken in conception and intent.

First--a long quote from the Preface to Dixon's The U.S.A.--The Land and the People

> "In most readers an attempt is made to provide the student with materials which are as light, entertaining, and inoffensive as possible. Since reading by itself is the chief aim of these courses, there is no interest in instructing the student in any other way. Such readers generally concentrate on fictional materials alone. Naturally, there is need for readers of this type in the average curriculum. On the other hand, there are also class situations where reading material of a more serious nature is required. Either students in these classes do not like fiction, or they simply prefer reading materials of a more practical kind. Such students wish to learn something at the same time they practice reading."

From Bigelow and Harris, The U.S.A.--Readings in English as a Second Language.

> We have made a sincere effort to select readings that would picture the country truthfully--avoiding too much glorification on the one hand and too severe criticism on the other.

Translated this means "truth = moderation," and that is a disenguous way of saying "I want to avoid anything which involves the risk of causing strong feelings."

From a composition text for native speakers; Messner and Messner's Collection: Literature for the Seventies.

> [This book] brings together the beauty, harmony, and message of the most creative and imaginative minds in the western literary tradition. [It] is designed to introduce today's college student to those works most fundamental in defining man's unique place in the universe.

This paper has been constructed so that by now you should be convinced that my thesis is reasonably accurate. You should be agreeing with me that EFL readers and rhetorics are inferior to freshman composition texts from the point of view of humanistic, liberal education. This is a good place then to speculate as to reasons why.

I have three in mind.

1) I have the impression based on eight years of work with foreign students that there is a lot of sentimentalism involved. There are times at NAFSA meetings when one can almost hear about our "little brown brothers." We are reluctant to do or say anything which would upset these delicate creatures who have traveled so far to be our guests. That is a nice feeling but it interferes with education.

2) I have another impression that textbook writers and teachers have generally confused simple syntax with simple-minded content. I don't think it is any easier to write about Eli Whitney or the first Thanksgiving in short sentences than it is to write about the Puritan ethic or lineality in western society in short sentences. We should not forget that all freshmen, whether native speakers or foreign students have to be taught how to read. And by that I mean how to read everything from Plato to Malcolm X.

3) There are simply too few advanced EFL texts. There are a lot of very bad freshman composition texts, but there one has a choice, an enormous choice. For EFL we have very few to choose among. It happens that a portion of those are totally unacceptable, another portion is moderately bad, and--it gives me great pleasure to say it--at least a portion are good. Among the last are the books by Erazmus and Cargas, by Baumwoll and Saitz, by Grindell, Morelli, and Nadler. There are, no doubt, others also, And the books from which I have taken the examples of triviality and the like are not totally bad. In fact, one reason Doty and Ross, and Friend were quoted so extensively is that I am currently using both myself.

The fact remains we need more books and we need better books. We need books which allow and encourage the foreign student to come in contact with the U.S. version of the western humanist tradition of learning.